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SECTION SIX

Winston Churchill, Pontiff

But Once in a While This Honorary War Correspondent Forgets Himself and Gives You a Bit of the Real Thing

THE very pontiff of all war correspondents is Winston Churchill—naturally, being the kind of man the Authors League of America elects to be its president. When he goes "over there" he dines with lords and earls, Lloyd George, admirals and potentates in general.

He sleeps in chateaux. He rides about in automobiles driven by officers with other officers to point things out to him. Nothing is barred to him—naval and army bases, repair plants, front line trenches, the inside of a "tank."

All of which should make fine "copy"—and on occasion in his *A Traveller in War Time* it does. But this happens only when in a moment of forgetfulness Mr. Churchill's pontifical robe slips off for a moment and the reporter peeps out. Then we get such glimpses as this of "tanks" in No Man's Land:

"The inevitable, relentless rain had set in again. We came to an expanse where many monsters were clumsily cavorting like dinosaurs in primeval slime. At some distance from the road others stood apparently tethered in line, awaiting their turn for exercise.

"Their commander, or chief mahout—as I was inclined to call him—was a cheerful young giant. He led me along a duck board over the morass to where one of these leviathans was awaiting us.

"You crawl through a greasy hole in the bottom, and the inside is as full of machinery as the turret of the Pennsylvania, and you grope your way to the seat in front beside that of the captain and conductor, looking out through a slot in the armor over a waste of water and mud. From here you are supposed to operate a machine gun.

"Behind you two mechanics have started the engines with a deafening roar, above which are heard the hoarse commands of the captain as he grinds in his gears. Then you realize that the thing is actually moving, that the bosses on the belt have managed to find a grip on the slime—and presently you come to the brink of what appears, to your exaggerated sense of perception, a bottomless chasm, with distant steep banks on the farther side that look unattainable and insurmountable.

Over the Top in a Tank.

"It is an old German trench which the rains have worn and widened. You brace yourself, you grip desperately a pair of brass handles in front of you, while leviathan hesitates, seems to sit up on its haunches . . . and then gently buries his nose in the pasty clay and paws his way upward into the field beyond.

"It was like sitting in a huge rocking chair. That we might have had a bump, and a bone-breaking one, I was informed after I had left the scene of the adventure. It all depends upon the skill of the driver. The monsters are not as tractable as they seem."

Or this glimpse in Ireland:

"A ring of emerald hills is broken by a little gap to seaward, and in the centre is a miniature emerald isle. The ships lying at anchor seemed like children's boats in a pond. To the right, where a river empties in, were scattered groups of queer, rakish craft, each with four slanting pipes and a tiny flag from her halyards. These were American destroyers. And in the midst of them, swinging to the tide, were the big 'mother ships' we have sent over to nurse them when after many days and nights of hazardous work at sea they have brought their flock of transports and merchantmen safely to port."

Winston Churchill
Author of "A Traveller in War Time"

Air Raided.

This is the magic carpet the real reporter spreads for us whereon to travel to realms of thrills, hardship and adventure without actually leaving our upholstered armchairs. We see through his eyes the air raid on London:

"The cloth had not been removed from the dinner table when a certain strange sound reached our ears—a sound not to be identified with the distant roars of the motor buses in Pall Mall, nor with the sharp bark of the taxi horns, although not unlike them. We were to be bombed! The anti-aircraft guns were already searching the sky for the invaders. . . .

"The little street was deserted, but in Pall Mall the dark forms of buses could be made out scurrying for shelter. Above the roar of London, the pop! pop! pop! of the defending guns was followed by the shriek and moans of the shrapnel shells as they passed close overhead. They sounded like giant rockets, and even as rockets some of them broke into cascades of sparks. Star shells they are called, bursting, it seemed, among the immutable stars themselves that burned serenely on. And there were other stars like November meteors hurrying across space—the lights of the British planes scouring the heavens. . . . Everywhere the restless white rays of the searchlights pierced the darkness."

We feel with him at last when we get back to New York "the sense of relief . . . not only the result of bright skies and a high barometer, of the palpable self-confidence of the pedestrians, of the white bread on the table and the knowledge that there was more, but of the ease of accomplishing things. I called for a telephone number and got it cheerfully and instantly. I sent several telegrams, and did not have to wait twenty minutes before a wicket while a painstaking official multiplied and added and subtracted and paused to talk with a friend."

In short we want to hear more from Winston Churchill, the reporter. But alas, as has been remarked, he is a pontiff. A pontiff must talk and write like one. Not things of mere sense, the living vibrant nerve impressions interest him, but statesmanlike reserve and sweep of speculation.

A pontiff, for instance, must not betray that dining with Lloyd George is anything out of the ordinary to him. Certainly he must not pander to our vulgar but very human curiosity to peep into the room and see how the Premier eats, how he cracks a joke, what tricks of individuality are his, and does he get warmed up when he talks war or doesn't he?

Good form in dignitaries forbids such betrayal. So that all we are permitted to glimpse of Lloyd George at lunch is: ". . . the present Premier, with a characteristic gesture, flung out his hand toward the portrait of a young man in the panel of the mantel. It was of the younger Pitt, who had taken his meals and drunk his port in the very room in that other great war a hundred years ago." This one sentence and no more.

Unfortunately for the reporter that occasionally slips out of Churchill, the dignitary, the writer was compelled to return to America at the end of chapter III. The rest of the book, therefore, is filled out with Mr. Churchill's essay on *The American Contribution and the Democratic Idea.*

It is a clear and respectable analysis of the great impulse toward world democracy which this war is giving and what America has done to help. He takes up the now famous programme of the British Labor Party and shows it as the expression of the world spirit now a-borning. But the analysis and speculation Mr. Churchill reveals in this essay are not in any way new or striking. Many a newspaper editorial writer who could not get a thrill out of us with his description of the sinking of a Lusitania could write as presentable an essay. Whereas Mr. Churchill has earned a reputation of pontifical amplitude on his ability as a descriptive narrator.

One can understand and forgive his wanting, like H. G. Wells, to rise from the novelist to the high estate of author-statesman; but one misses in him the realization of the high estate of the good reporter. Which makes all the more enjoyable Mr. Churchill's occasional lapses—or should they be called flights?—into the realms of vivid, sensuous, happily phrased reporting, which he started out to do in this book.

A TRAVELLER IN WAR TIME. By Winston Churchill. The Macmillan Company. $1.25.